

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1WASHINGTON POST
15 February 1985

McFarlane's Hidden Hand Helps Shape Foreign Policy

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He is a hidden hand behind administration foreign policy and the most prominent survivor of a second-term staff shake-up that has brought new faces to President Reagan's White House.

He remains deliberately obscure, overshadowed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, but has made his mark with Reagan

by helping to resolve many of the frequent policy disputes between the two strong-willed secretaries. His favorite mechanism for doing this is a private weekly breakfast at which the three officials, minus aides, reason together.

Robert Carl (Bud) McFarlane is a softspoken ex-Marine who as national security affairs adviser follows seemingly contradictory imperatives, guided by a view of Soviet power as grim and pervasive as that of the president.

Such incidents would never be related by McFarlane, a tight-lipped workaholic.

Administration officials say he is willing to sacrifice public image for private influence and to trade on the reputation he still holds at the Defense and State departments as an ideal staff man who poses no threat to Weinberger or Shultz.

Skeptics say McFarlane simply doesn't have the stature or presidential backing to challenge either secretary in a showdown.

McFarlane is aware, aides said, of Reagan's desire to have his Cabinet officers be policy spokesmen. He may be the only high-ranking administration official who practices the motto expressed by a sign on the president's desk: "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit."

McFarlane's expressionless manner has produced a public image of determined dullness that friends say shields a man who privately displays sharp wit and performs a near-perfect imitation of onetime boss Henry A. Kissinger. He uses the parody to remind hearers of the contrast between himself and the flamboyant intellectual who was President Richard M. Nixon's national security adviser.

One reporter described background briefings by McFarlane as given by "the man who wouldn't let you know if your suit was on fire." Baltimore Sun reporter Robert Timberg recently quoted New Right activist Paul M. Weyrich as saying of McFarlane: "He was created by God to disappear into crowds."

Quiet Source of Power

Friends say he relishes his role as a quiet source of power, helping to provide a theoretical framework for a president who, like McFarlane, is determined to maintain U.S. military power. McFarlane wrote the celebrated passage into a Reagan speech March 23, 1983, calling for creation of what immediately was dubbed "Star Wars."

In an infrequent interview, McFarlane described his goals, saying:

"The world lives in the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. The president believes, and I have strongly urged that he pursue, a fundamentally different idea, and that is that you really can go to a defensive

strategy. That would be an historic accomplishment if he were able to set that in motion. And that is probably the single greatest opportunity before us."

The interview in McFarlane's basement office in the White House is conducted under ground rules that permit no attribution without permission. McFarlane starts, as he often does, by sketching uses and limitations of U.S. military power in the 20th century, emphasizing what he sees as a two-century strain of national isolationism.

Though in the middle of what aides describe as a typical 17-hour day, he does not hurry the questioner or his answers.

McFarlane's friends and subordinates attest to his politeness and say he never shouts and rarely complains. He is described as loyal to friends and protective of his wife, Jonda, and their three children.

Much of McFarlane's humor is self-deprecatory: he likes to tell of the time a late-night television show producer told him he had "the most boring face" she had seen.

He is not above a barbed shot at his critics. Following the habits of a military career, he never criticizes his commander-in-chief. But he recently described Reagan's new director of communications, conservative former columnist Patrick J. Buchanan, as a "Jeane Kirkpatrick in long pants."

After the November election, Kirkpatrick was the choice of conservatives, including Buchanan, to replace McFarlane when she asked to leave as U.N. ambassador. Instead, Reagan gave McFarlane a prompt and public vote of confidence. Kirkpatrick has returned to teaching.

In an administration that has raised internal feuding to a high art, McFarlane has collected an incongruous set of admirers, among them former secretary of state Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III, Haig's nemesis when Baker was White House chief of staff.

Haig said McFarlane has brought a needed "sense of order and professionalism to the foreign policy processes of the Reagan administration." But he warned that McFarlane will face public scrutiny and criticism now that he has shed his image as a junior staff man.

Kenneth M. Duberstein, former White House congressional liaison and Baker loyalist, said McFarlane has become "the honest broker of the administration, giving the president what he wants and needs in a national security adviser."